Remembering 1898:
Literary Responses and Public Memory of the Wilmington Race Riot

by
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If the tables could once be turned, and it could be that it was the black race which violently and lastingly triumphed in the bloody revolution at Wilmington, North Carolina, a few years ago, what would not we excuse to the white man who made the atrocity the argument of his fiction?
William Dean Howells's
Review of Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*[1]

Recent scholarship on memory has revealed the ways in which Southerners have selectively remembered and forgotten aspects of their past, constructing a narrative of events to suit the needs of the present. After the Wilmington Race Riot, victorious state Democrats crafted their own narrative about the election and the violence that ensued. The popular memory of the Wilmington Race Riot legitimized the rule of the Democratic Party and effectively denied African Americans access to economic and political opportunities. The genre of historical fiction proved to be the most popular means of challenging the public memory of the riot. In the years that followed the riot, two African American writers, David Bryant Fulton and Charles Waddell Chesnutt, challenged the popular narrative of events, but they ultimately failed to capture a wide audience. The dominant memory of the event left little room for the black point of view. The popularity of Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865-1900* (1902) illustrated the nation's willingness to accept the southern white version of history and positioned the Wilmington Race Riot within the larger narrative of sectional reunion and American imperialism. This version of the riot, bolstered by Dixon's novel, remained unchallenged until the 1980s, when historians began analyzing the event in great detail. When Philip Gerard published *Cape Fear Rising* (1994), he found an audience more willing to discuss the race riot. Yet, in some ways, the political and cultural landscape of Wilmington remained under the influence of the narrative constructed by Democrats in 1898.[2]

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[1] William Dean Howells, "A Psychological Counter-current in Recent Fiction," *North American Review* 173 (December 1901).

[2] For a general survey of southern memories, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage "Introduction: No Deed but Memory," in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): pg. 1-28. Several authors have utilized the study of memory to examine the Wilmington Race Riot. Catherine Bishir has noted the impact that the 1898 Democratic victories had upon the cultural landscapes of Raleigh and Wilmington. See "Landmarks of Power: Building a Southern Past in Raleigh and Wilmington, North Carolina, 1885-1915," in *Where These Memories Grow*, pg. 139-168. In *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), Matthew Wilson examined the counter-narrative presented by Charles Chesnutt in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Leslie H. Hossfeld examined the political uses of memories of the riot, paying particular attention to silences and changes in the discourse on race relations and memory in the century after the riot. See *Narrative, Political Unconscious, and Racial Violence in Wilmington, North Carolina* (New York: Routledge, 2005). This essay draws inspiration from these works, and readers will detect their influences. In some ways this essay is synthetic, assembling the relevant parts of these works into a more complete story of the memory of the Wilmington Race Riot. Yet even a synthetic work would fail to address the significance of the work by David Bryant Fulton and Thomas Dixon. Furthermore, Hossfeld's discussion of Gerard's novel merely addresses the public response. This essay offers a comprehensive analysis of the literary and public debates over the history and memory of the Wilmington Race Riot.